

Discussing Activism in Cycling With Kathryn Bertine

Kathryn Bertine first became widely known in the cycling world following her 2014 film [Half the Road](#) – an analysis and critique of gender equity issues in the sport. She got her start in cycling as a journalist working for ESPN, when she was assigned a challenge in 2006: to attempt qualification for the 2008 Olympics, and chronicle the journey in a column and book. A former professional figure skater and triathlete, Bertine began road cycling at age 31. When the ESPN assignment ended, her cycling career had just begun. She made the Women’s World Tour pro ranks, competed in eight UCI world road championships, and won three Caribbean championship titles before retiring in 2017 at age 41.

While she didn’t qualify for the Olympics, that experience took Bertine deep into the sport, and educated her on the gross gender inequities which characterized cycling – and she gradually began to turn towards activism in sports. She was the founder of Le Tour Entier – a group of women cyclists including Marianne Vos and Emma Pooley, which successfully campaigned for the re-introduction of a women’s Tour de France in 2014. Behind the scenes, Le Tour Entier worked with ASO to create “La Course by Tour de France.” Bertine stood on the start line with Wiggle Honda Pro Cycling at age 39.

Since retiring, Bertine has dedicated her life to helping female athletes who are struggling with these inequities and the colossal pay gaps in pro cycling. She created the [Homestretch Foundation](#) to assist such athletes and has become a more strident activist for gender equality in broader sport.

On February 1st, Bertine released her fourth book, *STAND: A memoir on activism. A manual for progress. What really happens when we stand on the front lines of change.* The book covers the last ten years of Bertine’s life as a cyclist and an activist, chronicling her challenges and victories, and ups and downs on both fronts, as well as a number of highly personal challenges including a traumatic divorce and a life-threatening brain injury. Through it all, Bertine’s contagious optimism, energy, and ability to bounce back has kept her at the forefront, as a spokeswoman for equal rights in the sport. *The Outer Line* recently sat down with Kathryn to talk about the new book and her on-going activities to tackle the still omnipresent gender inequities in cycling.

The Outer Line: We know a little about your cycling career and past film projects, and your efforts around reinstating the women’s Tour de France “La Course” event. But give us a little background on how you came to be more involved in athlete activism.

Kathryn Bertine: Sure. I was always involved in different sports growing up, but my original entrance into journalism and media came when I was hired to work for ESPN in 2006. They wanted me to try to qualify for the 2008 Olympics and to write about my experiences as I went along. My love of cycling had just begun, and I really wanted to try to get into the pro ranks. But as I progressed and learned more about cycling, I began to realize there was a vast gap between the opportunities for men vs. women in the sport. I hadn’t really encountered that in the other sports I played before – like figure skating, running, rowing, and triathlon. So, I gradually started to study the issue of inequity in more detail. About things I could try to do to bring attention to that disparity, a fix it. I’d say that’s been my main focus over the last ten years, as a bike racer, writer, film-maker and activist.

TOL: When you decided to make “Half the Road,” all the big companies, including ESPN, turned you down. How did you manage to develop, fund, and then distribute that film?

KB: Yes, I had worked with EPSN in various capacities for several years, and so I went to them first. They listened to my pitch, but turned it down – they didn’t think anybody cared that much about women’s cycling. I was a little irked by that response, and I just said to myself, ‘I’m going to do this on my own.’ I was a pro racer by then, and I knew a lot of the athletes, and it seemed like a great time to launch a film.

So, I learned how to use crowd-funding techniques, and launched two campaigns on Indiegogo. We got the word out on Facebook and Twitter. The money came in equally from men and women – anywhere from \$10 to \$10,000 – and from 16 different countries. We raised a total of \$77,000. My cinematographer partner, Kevin Tokstad, and I met each other through a social media connection. It took us a couple of years, but the film ended up doing incredibly well – *Half the Road* was picked up for international distribution, we screened in ten film festivals, won three of them, toured internationally the first 18 months, and I'm still getting royalty checks annually!

Even more important, the film helped me better understand the teamwork element when it comes to creating change. How individuals working together can actually accomplish very big things. It set me on a path toward what I call “benevolent disruption.” It got me started on a course of trying to expose, explain and address the basic gender inequities in the sport.

TOL: How did you get focused on the women’s Tour de France effort? Why did you pick that particular project and what changes were you able to affect there?

KB: *Half the Road* didn’t come out until 2014, but the challenges and inequities that we discussed there, and all the people we talked to in the process, led me inevitably toward the marquee event in the sport – Tour de France, and its owner, the Amaury Sports Organisation (ASO). It was unfair that women were excluded from the pinnacle event in road cycling. There was a parallel women’s race back in the 1950s and again for a few years in the 1980s. The fans loved it. For ASO to cancel the race was wrong on many levels.

Through the website Change.org, I launched a petition in July of 2013 – asking ASO to reinstate a women’s Tour de France. Our pressure group, Le Tour Entier – French for “The whole tour”—included World Champions and Olympic medalists Marianne Vos and Emma Pooley, and four-time Ironman world champion Chrissie Wellington. Together we drew up manifestos, websites, and impactful visibility and support for the effort of women’s inclusion at the Tour de France. We surprised even ourselves with the success of the petition on Change.org, garnering 100,000 signatures in just a couple of months. We were one of Change.org’s most successful petitions of 2013.

I had been trying for years to get a meeting to discuss this with ASO but had never had any response. However, when they saw the level of public interest and support our petition was demonstrating, they finally agreed to a private meeting, in October of 2013. All the big guys were there – Prudhomme, Le Moenner, and the top lieutenants. And they insisted the meeting be top secret; they actually put a gag order on us.

Le Tour Entier and ASO started working together, and ASO soon agreed to put on an event that summer – July of 2014. We were thrilled that we were getting things done that fast, even though it was only a one-day event. Of course, the reason for keeping everything secret was that they wanted the credit for creating La Course by Tour de France. Even today, they still don’t really acknowledge the role we played in getting the event off the ground. But that’s OK. We didn’t do this for fame. We did this for equal opportunity for women.

The 2014 event went beyond their financial and visibility expectations of success. ASO agreed to do it again in 2015. Our original agreement was that they would add three to five days annually until La Course was the same distance as the men’s event. We kept pressing ASO to add more days, but they dragged their feet on that, adding only one then taking it away. Other key players weren’t exactly supportive either. Neither Pat McQuaid nor Brian Cookson (former UCI Presidents) showed that much interest or commitment to building women’s cycling. In the end, ASO didn’t stick to their promise.

TOL: Were you continuing to race throughout this time period?

KB: Well yes, I continued as a pro cyclist, and started focusing on the battle for a minimum salary for the pro women – something that we finally achieved in 2020. I also started to conceive and work on the plans for my Homestretch Foundation. Then in April of 2016, at a bike race in Mexico, I was in a pretty bad accident and sustained a serious brain injury, which almost killed me. But after a long period of recovery, I realized that the accident gave me a gift – a better perspective when it comes to life and death. We all live so close to death, but rather than see that as morbid or depressing, I see it as an amazing opportunity to embrace life. To celebrate the good stuff. I’m lucky to be here, and I know it! And I try to celebrate a lot. Health, happiness, friends, and family. Those are my Big Four, and cycling is a solid number 5!

TOL: So, we should talk about your new book, *STAND*. Tell us about the main themes, and what your primary objectives were in writing another book.

KB: I wanted to do two things with this book: First, share what really happens when we stand up and fight for change, and second, prove that anybody can make change happen – even when it seems like the whole world is against you. That we “regular people” can effect change; activism isn’t just the territory of the rich and famous, politicians or celebrities. This book is about proving that we are all capable of changing the system.

So, the book is a mix of memoir and manual. At the back of the book, there is an actual “activist’s manual” – a set of guidelines and recommendations for trying to effect change, and lessons that I have learned during my experiences. My hope is that “STAND” will help others realize they can also create change, in their own environments. Doesn’t have to involve cycling!

TOL: Why did you decide to self-publish *STAND*, when you had already been successful in writing books with the big, corporate publishing houses?

KB: I didn’t choose this route, I would say it chose me. All three of my previous books were published by traditional publishers. But when my agent pitched the book proposal, all the big publishers essentially said “Nobody is that interested in a book about women who stand up for change. Don’t bother writing it. Won’t sell. There’s no room on the shelf.” At first, this really discouraged me, but then I got pissed off – my switch sort of flipped, and I became angry. I thought ‘if there is not room on the shelf for a book about activism, then we need to build a new shelf!’

Of course, publishing a book on your own is a different story. There are no monetary advances, and so this book took a long time to finish. I had to work other jobs to support myself, so writing around those parameters ended up taking me three years to finish the first draft, and one more year for the production of “STAND.” And I had to foot the bill for a team of editors, graphic artists, publicists, and so on.

TOL: What audience is the book really geared to, who do you hope will really sit up and pay attention?

KB: This book is for smart, curious readers who want to know what happens when we stand on the front lines of change. Also, for people who connect with authenticity and vulnerability. There’s a lot of personal stuff in *STAND*, and it has to be that way. A life in public activism and our private lives are inextricably melded.

I talk to my reader audience about issues like depression, mental health, and suicide – previously taboo subjects that are finally becoming destigmatized – things that need to be taken out of the shadows and talked about more freely. I felt like I had some experiences and advice on these topics which I could offer to others.

I also believe that our individual stories matter, they need to be told, and that this is what I was called to

do. Somebody once said, *do what you love and the money will come*. Although this book may help me a little financially, I certainly didn't do this for the money. And even if I were ever to become a multi-millionaire, not much would change about my life.

TOL: Finally, tell us a little bit about your Homestretch Foundation? What are its larger objectives, and what does it actually do on a day-to-day basis?

KB: Well, first a little bit of context. Due to my divorce in 2014, I found myself in a pretty difficult financial situation. And that really bothered me, because I was racing on a UCI team and knew if I were a man, I would've had a base salary guarantee. I almost had to give up the sport—when I was at my physical peak and racing great!—simply because I had to carry two other part-time jobs to make up for my non-existent base salary in pro cycling. Made me think, *where can women go for support when they are faced with this sort of gender pay gap?* That's when I came up with the idea of Homestretch Foundation – as a place for professional female athletes to live and get their economic and financial footing in place.

I was fortunate to find a business partner who provided the initial funding, to get the housing element off the ground. At our compound, we provide financial support, and the resident-athletes provide support to each other. So far, we have supported 70 different pro to top-level amateur athletes in the program, who come from 17 different countries. Behind the scenes, we worked to create a base salary for women at the WorldTour level. The UCI finally passed this rule in 2020. So far, Homestretch has truly made a difference in effecting change.

Bertine's new book was published on February 1, and is available through [Barnes and Noble](#), [Amazon.com](#), and can be ordered at your local bookstore.